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## **TERRITORIAL INEQUALITY: A NEW PRIORITY FOR EUROPE**

ARGUMENTS FOR PLACE-SENSITIVE POLICIES  
AND INVESTMENTS

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*Territorial Thinkers is an independent platform of experts, highly experienced in European, national, regional and local policy development with a territorial dimension.*

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# Territorial Inequality: a new priority for Europe

## Arguments for place-sensitive policies and investments

*Territorial inequalities – the increasing imbalances in welfare and living conditions between places – are becoming excessive. People and places are drifting apart. This is resulting in a high level of discontent in those areas being ‘left behind’, which in turn become breeding grounds for nationalism/populism and anti-EU sentiment.*

*Europe is therefore in the front line of the problem of territorial inequality, as it is a major source of very many citizens turning their backs on Europe if nothing substantial and innovative is done in policy terms to halt and reverse this trend.*

*What is more, the EU needs to adapt itself to ever more global political and economic interdependencies, become a major player promoting a European model for the digital future as well as a key global actor in combatting climate change and ensuring a sustainable approach to the environment, etc. These fundamental challenges all have a strong territorial dimension.*

*Quite radical policy changes and initiatives at the European level are therefore unavoidable, including far more explicit and conscious attention to the territorial dimension, which until now has been generally overlooked by European policy makers. Not doing so will challenge the very aim of a more cohesive Europe.*

*Focussing above all on territorial inequality, this paper puts the case for such initiatives based on facts and proposing policy recommendations on what more should be done to support Europe’s aim of better territorial cohesion.*

### **Key messages:**

- **Territorial inequality** is an important source of anti-EU sentiment and populism.
- **Need to act.** Inequalities between places and people in Europe are increasing and threatening the fundament of European integration and the basis for economic prosperous cities and regions.
- **Territorial cohesion.** To avoid that places in Europe drift further apart and people turn to extremist parties, Europe needs to enforce the objective of Territorial Cohesion, embedded in the Lisbon Treaty (Art. 3 TEU). This is not just about money to be distributed to places left behind. Essentially, it is about supporting the capacity of places to improve and develop, in particular the quality of governance, from the local to the EU level.
- **Policy delivery.** All EU policies need to reflect the diversity of places where people live, how different territorial preconditions can help to deliver the policy objectives, and what the impacts of a policy are on different types of territories. In all sector policies, cooperation between places across all levels of administrative borders needs to be promoted for an effective and efficient delivery on policy objectives.
- **Shared narrative.** Policies shaping the future of Europe should be based on shared aspirations in a vision and strategy for a just and sustainable future for all places in Europe, based on their own genuine potentials, which needs to be elaborated in a broad societal debate.
- **Key players.** The new EU Commissioners, the European Parliament, the Committee of the Regions, the European Investment Bank but also the EU Member States should address the territorial dimension in their future policy outlines and ensure that there will be a future for all places in Europe.
- **New and innovative politics.** Politics, and above all European politics, should be concerned with territorial inequalities and with the impact political and policy decisions have on people and places. The following arguments in detail why Europe should take a new and innovative approach to place-sensitive policies and investments, what should be done and by whom.

## 1 Why be concerned about inequality and territory?

For many years now, inequality in Europe has been growing, and now it has reached a level that is incompatible with the social free market model of society that is so unmistakably European. This high level of inequality is growingly a threat to European integration and even to democracy.

Inequality has a very significant territorial dimension. Individual inequalities often get clustered into specific areas, manifesting themselves as territorial inequalities. The impacts of (lack of) policies in such places being 'left behind' are often long term and structural so that disadvantaged places produce disadvantaged inhabitants, citizens with lower chances to fully participate in society. It is time to break this vicious circle.

Territorial inequality comes with related side effects, which can be different from place to place, but often include: the outmigration of young, active people (often over-proportionally young women and/or skilled people with ambitions); loss of social infrastructure and professionals (doctors, schools etc.); lower attractivity for firms to invest and loss of qualified employment; and much more. As a consequence, a deep resentment often develops among the people that stay of being left-behind, having no future, being overheard and feeling disregarded.

Such 'places left behind' are breeding grounds for protest, for anti-European and/or anti-democratic populist parties. Indeed, there is a very significant correlation between, on the one hand, the increasing and arguably now excessive disparities and inequalities between rich and poor, included and excluded, powerful and powerless and, on the other hand, the serious socio-political challenges of re-emerging nationalism, populism and civic discontent. Surveys show that this sentiment of being disregarded is relatively independent from a (poor) personal situation, but rather it reaches far into the middle classes; it is a social and collective rather than an individual sentiment: "We here in (wherever) are left-behind, not heard, not seen". This gives inequality a new and serious dimension: It is about 'people left behind', living in 'places left behind'. The 'old' inequality debate often had an anti-capitalist, socialist connotation whereas the new inequality debate is often connected to anti-democratic and nationalist arguments. In short, increasing inequality is a major source of anti-EU sentiment.

Europe has experienced dramatic changes in recent decades; especially – but not only – people in former socialist countries of Central and Eastern-Europe, who have had to make vigorous efforts to adapt to new economic and political conditions. It is obvious that fundamental changes will go on, above all those involving adaptation to a carbon-free and digitalised society. The world is in transition which makes people anxious and vulnerable to all kinds of (false) promises. In the process of this Great Transformation (WBGU – German Advisory Council on Global Change, 2016, 2019), it is of utmost importance that the aspiration is that all people and all places are included, and nobody is left behind.

Increasing inequalities between people and places is manifest at all territorial levels, from local through regional and national to the European level. This means that the problem has to be tackled at all levels, including a clear and strong policy response at the European level.

This situation demands from politics to explicitly take places into account when formulating and implementing policies - not just disadvantaged places left behind, but also innovative dynamic places that are the economic engines producing the wealth of Europe's nations. What Europe needs is a good territorial balance, where all member states, all regions and places participate and contribute to the larger whole with diverse achievements. It is not enough that disadvantaged places are on a drip feed keeping them somehow alive; they have to be an active, inherent and acknowledged part of the European territory. This is what the EU Treaty calls 'Territorial Cohesion'.

## 2 What are the facts of territorial inequality?

Territorial inequality manifests itself at all levels: local (poor and rich neighbourhoods in cities and between municipalities), regional and national (prosperous areas and areas in decline) but also at the European level. There have been many attempts to analyse the territorial dimension of inequalities both in general terms by ESPON (see [www.espon.eu](http://www.espon.eu)) and in an EU-wide perspective (see e.g. Böhme & Martin, 2019; ESPON, 2019) or focusing on 'areas left behind', 'places that do not matter' (Rodríguez-Pose, 2018), 'places of discontent' (Dijkstra, Poelman, & Rodríguez-Pose, 2018), 'politically abandoned' (Hillje, 2018) and the 'diverse geography of future perspectives' (Böhme, Lürer, & Toptsidou, 2019).

Growing inequalities between places lead to 'areas of discontent' (Dijkstra et al., 2018) where some areas enjoy a positive outlook for the future while others (often more rural areas) face decline and meagre hopes. This emerging geography of diverse future perspectives risks threatening European integration and Europe's economic development (Böhme et al., 2019).

The research shows that inequality is far more complex than differences in regional GDP. While GDP is widely used as a proxy to assess the economic performance of regions (Iammarino, Rodríguez-Pose, & Storper, 2017), e.g. for cohesion policy eligibility, it includes items not directly related to a feeling of being well-off (e.g. corporate income taxes, undistributed corporate benefits). At the same time the debate about inequalities comprises subjective inequalities, e.g. concerning differences in opportunities, the impacts of globalisation and exposure to specific risks.

Several studies and publications (see e.g. Dijkstra et al., 2018; ESPON, 2017, 2019; European Commission, 2017; Rodríguez-Pose, 2018; Rodríguez-Pose & Ketterer, 2019) highlight various aspects of territorial inequalities in the EU. Understanding that the analysis of one variable cannot provide a comprehensive picture, the map developed by Spatial Foresight in the context of an ESPON study (2019) provides just one example and serves the purpose of visualising the territorial reality in Europe and stimulating a broad and crucial discussion among key policy makers.

Although 'places left behind' are currently the biggest threat for the European project, there are other types of places and challenges that need political attention. From all the work done by ESPON and others up until now, a number of facts on territorial inequality are clear:

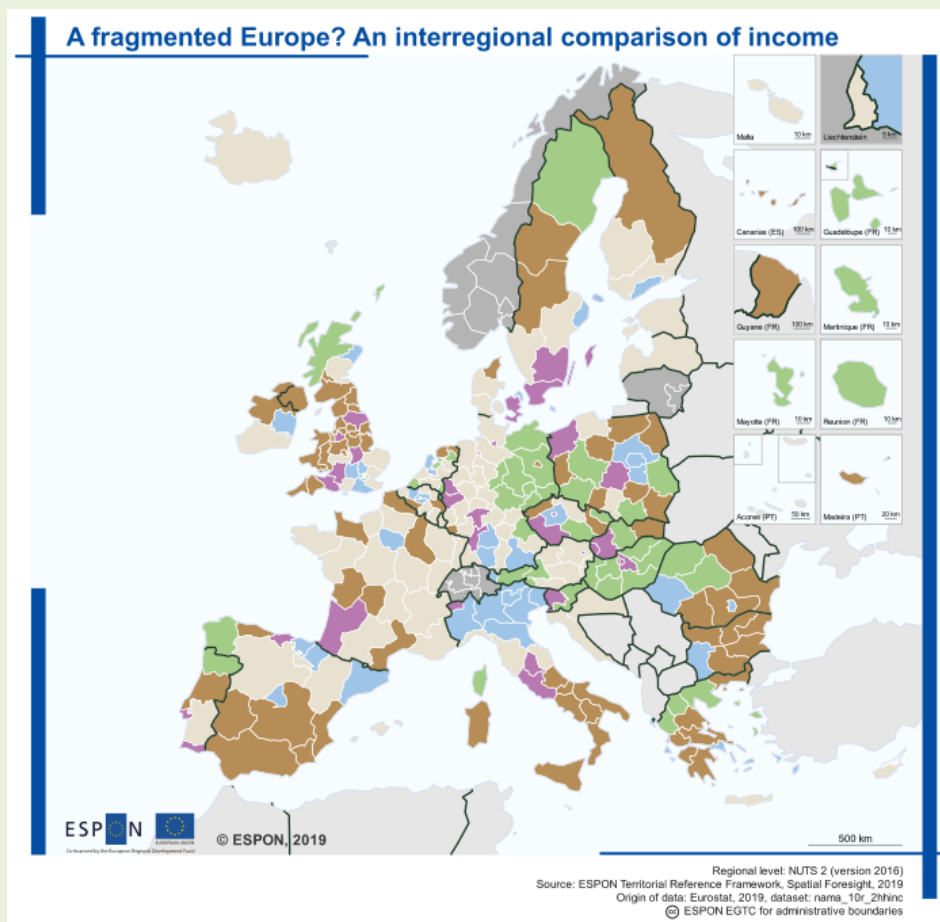
- Some growing urban areas face specific challenges in environment (e.g. air quality, heat islands), social liveability (e.g. affordable housing) and other fields.
- Secondary cities and inner peripheries often have a high quality of living, but also have the particular challenge to position themselves wisely between metropolitan and rural areas.
- Rural areas close to major cities on the one hand are profiting from the potential of the city and on the other hand are running the risk of being drained by that same city.
- Rural areas in the peripheries of the national and/or European territory have better potentials when they build cooperation networks of small cities.
- Remote and sparsely populated areas are at grave risk of finding themselves in a vicious circle of losing development.
- Border regions have particular challenges but - with good governance and cooperation and the right supportive policies - also particular potentials.

Present policies do not take on board the above, indisputable trends and policies sufficiently. To really turn the boat around, territorial inequalities and specificities have to be addressed.

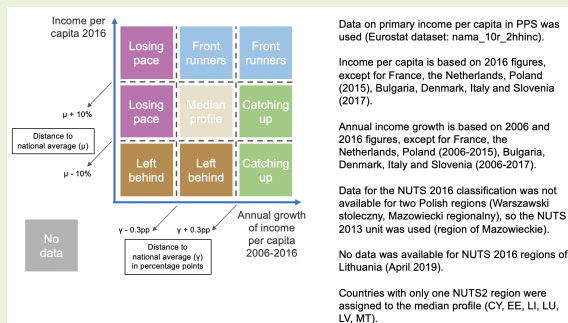
## Mapping inequalities between places

Inequality is not only about income; it has to be understood more broadly as the quality of life and life opportunity that exist where people live. Looking into income data (primary income per capita, in PPS) instead of GDP offers some insights into people's perceived well-being. By combining absolute income data for 2016 with average annual growth rates for 2006-2016, both the current level (static) and the development perspective over time (dynamic) are covered. People in regions with high levels of income but a downward outlook are probably more pessimistic than people in regions with lower levels of income but positive future perspectives due to better performance.

The map compares the value of each region to its respective national average, as due to media, language and cultural ties, people tend to compare their situation with their fellow nationals rather than with the situation in countries beyond their own national borders. In order to identify regions very close to the national average and avoid confounding them with regions further apart, thresholds have been set for both dimensions resulting in three classes for each dimension (below, around, above national average) and consequently in nine groups. The nine groups have been merged to five final categories: **Front runners**: Regions with high levels of income and medium-high growth rates; **Catching-up**: Regions with low-medium levels of income and high income growth; **Losing pace**: Regions with medium-high levels of income and low income growth; **Left behind**: Regions with low levels of income and low-medium income growth; **Median**: Regions with medium level of income and medium income growth.



Source: ESPON (2019)



### 3 What is the present policy situation?

It can be argued, quite correctly, that territorial inequality has been the subject of (certainly budget-wise) very significant EU policy for some four decades, since regional policy started. Regional and rural development policies, mainly now the European Structural Investment Funds (ESIF), have for years been making significant investments (€643 billion under the European Structural and Investment Funds 2014-2020). These investments have over the years become increasingly effective, amongst other things by taking into consideration a greater degree of 'territorial awareness', i.e. not investing in 'splendid territorial isolation' but by investing strategically in projects that would have a wider, positive territorial impact. Despite this, these investments have not been able to sufficiently offset the increase in territorial inequalities. The forces of globalisation and neo-liberal capitalism have proven too strong.

So, what can be done in the new budgetary period 2020-2026 to tackle territorial inequality?

#### 3.1 What policy responses are on the table?

The current policy pipeline includes the following ambitions by key policy players and processes. The question is whether they are enough?

- **G7:** Recognising its strong connection with civic unrest and political instability, inequality has recently been put on the high-level political agenda in different powerful and influential circles, such as the World Economic Forum and latest by the G7 countries. There is a recognition that inequality is not only about income or living conditions but has to be understood as having a say in the decisions about the crucial questions of our time and of being part of creating the new society of the future. This is an important background starting point for EU policies.
- **New EU Commission:** In favour of a broader support from EU citizens, the European Commission has defined six headline ambitions for Europe over the next five years and well beyond:
  - A European Green Deal;
  - An economy that works for people;
  - A Europe fit for the digital age;
  - Protecting our European way of life;
  - A stronger Europe in the world;
  - A new push for European democracy.

Clearly creating chances for all and equality in all its senses is one of the core elements in these new European Commission policy ambitions. However, the territorial dimension is very underexposed and enjoys little explicit attention.

- **ESIF:** Regional policies have been faced with declining political and budgetary importance over the last decade. Now, with Brexit and the transition towards a carbon-free and digitalized society leading to significant policy shifts, this trend will probably continue. These new policies in support of a Green Deal and the Digital Age must be coined in a way that supports more territorial cohesion in a sustainable Europe and used to fight disparities between places. Economic, social and territorial cohesion are major overarching objectives of the European Union that, in the next 5 to 8 years, have to create new impulses for offsetting territorial inequality.
- **Intergovernmental cooperation:** EU Member States are currently engaged in developing a Territorial Agenda 2030 that would update policy priorities for the further development of the European territory and its diversity of places. This initiative, to be tabled during the German EU Presidency in 2020, could become important as a lever for a territorial dimension in European policy thinking (see [www.territorialagenda.eu](http://www.territorialagenda.eu)). The European institutions, especially the Commission, need to take it seriously. Still, to avoid that the Territorial Agenda becomes only a toothless paper tiger, it needs a strong commitment from policy makers for a powerful application.

- **European Territorial Cooperation (ETC) programmes:** ETC, often called Interreg, is a small but very important EU programme to support the development of concrete projects, policies and strategies through cooperation in situ. It should be given a stronger role in counteracting territorial inequalities. The programme's experience should be exploited to further develop place-sensitive policies.

### 3.2 Why are current policy responses not sufficient to offset territorial inequality?

Unfortunately, all these policy ambitions do not reflect sufficiently the fact that EU territories are very diverse and represent a huge variety of places and spaces. A multitude of combinations of strengths and weaknesses in the economic base, welfare and living conditions, etc., exists around the EU. The appearance of major challenges, their local significance and impact and the need for action, differ substantially between geographical levels and between specific localities. By failing to address this diversity, the policy ambitions on cohesion and investments reducing disparities fall short of releasing potentials and delivering efficiently on the growing territorial inequalities.

Moreover, the large majority of policies affect places and territories in different ways. Territorial impacts are normally not taken (enough) into account when shaping and implementing EU policies. The current policy responses to major challenges facing the EU such as climate change, trade and world market integration, demography and migration, are all oblivious to their impact on living conditions in different types of places, regions and neighbourhoods. This calls for a territorial dimension to be applied in EU policy making in general and impact analyses to be place- and area-specific and future oriented.

Therefore, it is crucial for the acceptance and efficiency of future EU policies, that a territorial dimension or recognition of the huge diversity of places becomes mandatory. All EU policies need to reflect the diversity of needs and opportunities of individual places and communities. One size fits all approaches based on sector considerations should be a thing of the past. At the European level, it is important to find another approach to achieve progress towards better territorial cohesion.

Furthermore, an important element will be to find and define a new concept of solidarity among the citizens of Europe, acknowledging, re-affirming, including and balancing all three dimensions: national (*fraternité, solidarité*), European (cohesion), and international (asylum, refugees, immigration) solidarity.

## 4 What more needs to be done and by whom?

The starting point for a new approach to tackling territorial inequality must be the acceptance that regional and urban policies and other ESIF investments alone will not turn the tide. However, they are very significant amounts of money, enough to persuade the member states and their local and regional authorities to pool efforts, thereby considerably increasing the effectiveness of territorially strategic investments aimed at improving the potential of lagging places and areas. In this respect, European money would be seen more as trigger money to bring in investments from within the member states, but then going considerably further than simple 'additionality'.

In addition, the structural and psychological situation of 'people and places left behind' cannot be compensated by just transferring money. Money alone cannot provide for re-integration. Wise future-oriented concepts and a true – and perceived – inclusion of the citizens of such places are needed.

The following sums up and highlights some general pointers and recommendations on where European policies need to make progress and address the key drivers of European policies. Firstly, the catalogue of what needs to be done is outlined. Thereafter, selected EU leaders and EU institutions are addressed directly to illustrate, and hopefully inspire, what they should do.

## 4.1 What should European politics deliver?

The European Commission, the European Parliament and national governments in Europe are encouraged to take the territorial cohesion objective seriously and act accordingly:

- **The EU needs to make the territorial cohesion objective a guiding policy principle.** Territorial Cohesion is embedded in the Lisbon Treaty (Art. 3 TEU) as an objective of the European Union alongside economic and social cohesion. Given the strong correlation between social and political discontent, anti-EU sentiment and territorial inequality, it is time to revive and take the territorial cohesion objective seriously. Territorial cohesion needs to stop being just a rather vague, background policy principle and become a leading and guiding policy fundament upon which all policies with a strong territorial dimension/impact should be focused. Territorial cohesion must come to mean what it says: achieving a greater cohesion within the EU's territory.
- **The EU needs to improve the quality of governance, from the local to the EU level.** Traditional factors such as physical capital, human capital and technology cannot explain all variations in regional development in Europe. The quality of government and governance processes at all levels of public decision making (incl. transparency, accountability, participation and anti-corruption) is important for regional and local development – and varies considerably between European regions and cities. Good governance capacities, including new methods of social innovation and involvement of citizens in policy decision-making, are a necessary challenge especially for many local and smaller regional bodies. They need support in improving their governance capacities.
- **Cooperation between places should be promoted as a must not a luxury.** What happens in one place affects the development perspectives of another place, and in many cases development potential or challenges cannot be addressed by one place single-handedly, be it a municipality, region or Member State. Interdependencies between places give cooperation an undisputed added value, and in many cases make territorial cooperation a must rather than a luxury. This concerns cooperation in functional areas within a country or across borders, as well as between places cooperating in wider geographical settings beyond national borders. Cooperation between places must not be limited to European Territorial Cooperation programmes, known as INTERREG, it needs to be mainstreamed across all policies and governance levels. In all policy sectors, cooperation between places needs to be seen as a precondition for an effective and efficient delivery of the targets set. If the EU would insist on a considerable percentage of ESIF money being sent on projects involving cooperation with other (especially neighbouring) areas, then this would be ‘trigger money’ well applied, and considerably increase the positive impact of development investments.
- **The EU needs a place-sensitive policy approach reflecting the diversity of places where people live.** Improving EU citizens’ content and reducing inequalities will require targeted place sensitive policies, interventions and investments. It is important to stimulate places that are catching up or losing pace in their development, as well as to make a special effort to support places that are left behind. The upcoming transformations towards a carbon-free economy and wise use of digital technologies must not enlarge inequalities, but benefit all places equally, as far as possible. Proper analyses and forecasts as well as citizens’ participation should provide policy-makers with detailed information and evidence. Place sensitivity needs to be ensured in all decisions and implementation within relevant policies addressing EU-wide problems but making them tailored to the specific needs of places. One-size-fits-all approaches based on sector considerations should be a thing of the past.
- **All relevant EU directives and measures should be assessed regarding their impacts on territories and places.** It is crucial for the acceptance and efficiency of future EU policies that a territorial dimension or a sensitivity to the diversity of places becomes mandatory. All EU policies need to focus on European solutions but at the same time reflect the diversity of needs and opportunities of individual places and communities. The European Parliament (REGI Committee) and the European Committee of the Regions (COTER Committee) can be supportive in finding the best solutions.



- **The EU needs a vision and strategy for a just and sustainable future for all places in Europe.** What future do we want our children to live in? Bringing Europe together is about limiting excessive inequalities between people and between places. Moving towards a Union of less inequality and less unsustainable development requires a clear European narrative with objectives and vision for policy action. Europe needs broad, bold visions and strategies for its future. This needs to be done through a profound communication and dialogue between politics and people – especially the younger generations. Developing a vision and building the Europe for future generations, both in socio-economic, ecological, cultural and territorial terms, cannot be done by ‘muddling through’. The current policy ambitions for Europe, and the many specific, major initiatives previewed by the new European Commission should therefore be enlarged by adding a vision and strategy for a just and sustainable future for all places in Europe.
- **The territorial strategy for a just and sustainable European future should include:**
  - (1) Set objectives and standards for reducing inequalities between places and ensure sustainable development of places;
  - (2) Make place-sensitivity and the assessment regarding impacts on territories and places mandatory for all EU policies;
  - (3) Set objectives in European Structural Investment Funds that explicitly and in a targeted manner deal with territorial inequalities, and steer the use of the previewed Just Transition Fund accordingly;
  - (4) Ensure that the strategy is used as a reference framework in the formulation and implementation of other sector policy areas;
  - (5) Enlarge cooperation with neighbouring areas on new ideas and joint activities as the future of concrete living places today extend beyond administrative borders;
  - (6) Build on the upcoming Territorial Agenda 2030 (see [www.territorialagenda.eu](http://www.territorialagenda.eu)) when setting objectives and standards for the reducing territorial inequalities within the Union to an acceptable level; and
  - (7) Inform European citizens about the concerted efforts made to decrease inequalities and improve welfare and living conditions in all places of the EU and debate solutions in regional gatherings.

Only a coordinated effort across policies will ensure maximum benefits towards an acceptable and politically stable level of equality and thereby the most positive effect in attitude and acceptance of Europeans towards the European process.

## 4.2 What should key European policy makers do?

The new EU Commission is encouraged to take a leading role, in particular:

- **Ursula von der Leyen**, President-elect of the EU Commission: Make place sensitivity and territorial cohesion a leading and guiding objective for all EU policies. Launch a Strategy for a Just and Sustainable Europe combined with the intended European Green Deal and add a clear territorial dimension to the Just Transition Fund. Start a public dialogue on the future of Europe and include a series of (macro-) regional and local discussions with citizens to discuss the place relevant aspects of EU policies and visions. Be aware of and support the priorities of the renewed Territorial Agenda to be agreed during the German EU Presidency in 2020.
- **Valdis Dombrovskis**, Executive Vice President-Designate with a focus on an economy that works for people: Make sure the transition towards a sustainable carbon-free and digital economy works for all people and takes on board the diverse economic prospects and potentials of places around the Union. Make sure that European investments support territorial strategies in an integrated and coordinated manner; territorial strategies should be part of the Conference on the future of Europe. Increasing inequalities between people ultimately translate into inequalities between places (be it neighbourhoods, cities, regions or countries).

- **Elisa Ferreira**, designated Commissioner for Cohesion and Reforms: Cohesion Policy is a key lever of change. The territorial cohesion theme needs to become stronger and address the growing inequalities between places. Play an active role in the formulation of a Strategy for a Just and Sustainable Europe and position ESIF as an important lever for actions. Make informed analyses of places, regional development strategies, good governance and more territorial cooperation key priorities. Make sure the EU objective of territorial cohesion and the objectives of an upcoming renewed Territorial Agenda, to be agreed upon during the German EU Presidency in 2020 become a leading and guiding policy fundament on which all policies with a strong territorial dimension/impact should be focused.
- **Frans Timmermans**, Vice President-Designate with a focus on the European Green Deal: Ensure that the transition to a sustainable Europe does not further accelerate inequalities between people and places in Europe. Ensure support to place-based transition strategies in order to avoid that the transition increases inequalities. The support needs to be more than just money and also involve capacity-building and support for good governance. Regional and local initiatives that support the European Green Deal should be stimulated and supported.
- **Maroš Šefčovič**, Vice President-Designate with a focus on interinstitutional relations and foresight, ensure that all fields of EU policy making recognise the importance to address territorial inequalities and apply sensitivity to places. Furthermore, push the EU foresight activities to pay attention to and provide evidence on the diversity of places and how future trends and EU policies affect different places differently. More territorial foresight is needed.

### 4.3 What should key European institutions do?

Besides the new European Commission, other key European players also play a crucial role in giving a greater priority to tackling the problem of territorial inequality.

- **European Parliament – REGI Committee:** Make sure that territorial inequalities and the territorial implications of EU policies are closely monitored and debated by the European Parliament, not least of all the REGI Committee. Support the different policy initiatives recommending the European Commission to promote place-sensitive policies and investments. Take an active part in a Territorial Agenda 2030 for the EU.
- **European Committee of the Regions – COTER Committee:** Work with local and regional authorities to strengthen their contributions to (a) reducing territorial inequalities and unsustainable developments, (b) strengthening the understanding of Europe's diversity of places in EU and national decision making, and (c) promote territorial cooperation in functional areas. Support the different policy initiatives recommending the European Commission to promoting place sensitive policies and investments. Encourage its members to accept mainstreaming territorial cooperation. Take active part in a Territorial Agenda 2030 for the EU.
- **European Investment Bank:** Support place-sensitive investments through lending, grant-loan blending and advising activities, without jeopardising its financial discipline. Develop together with the EU and relevant national, regional and local actors a vision and perspective for a more sustainable and more inclusive Europe that makes wise use of new digital technologies.
- **EU Member States:** Take the territorial dimension seriously and support the policy recommendations of a more place-sensitive approach to future European policy-making as a way to contribute to more European integration, cohesion and less protests and anti-European sentiment. Make the Territorial Agenda 2030 for the EU an important strategic instrument with a strong commitment for a powerful application. Leave nobody behind in the development of your national territory and ensure cooperation of cities and regions, also beyond national borders.

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